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Recognizing Oneself

God has a special purpose for every individual human being. To be born into this world is to make a promise to God that one will spend one's life fulfilling the purpose that God intends for one. The worth of every human being lies in his faithfulness to this promise.

God has endowed every individual with certain talents. These talents may be inborn, or they may develop at a later stage in life. It is for every human being to recognize where his talents lie, and then make use of them, thereby enacting the role that God has singled out for him. One who recognizes himself in this way has taken up his true place in God's pattern of creation, while one who fails to do so will find himself at odds – not only with himself – but with the whole of creation.

This can be illustrated by the respective cases of two companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Abu Huraira was one of the companions, and Khalid, the son of Walid, another. No less than 5,374 traditions (sayings of the Prophet) have been related on the authority of Abu Huraira, while less than one hundred can be traced back to Khalid. Extraordinary as this disparity may seem, all it indicates is a difference in the arena in which they worked. It does not mean that one of them did more for Islam than the other.

Abu Huraira and Khalid were both sincere, dedicated Muslims. But as regards talents, they were very different from each other. Each of them awoke to his separate vocation in life, and followed it implicitly. In accordance with his own particular abilities, Abu Huraira picked one arena in which to serve the cause of Islam, while Khalid picked another, equally suitable one, for himself.

Before Khalid became a Muslim, he took part in several military campaigns against Islam. He later told of how he used to fight with the feeling that he had "adopted a mistaken stance" -that he was fighting for the wrong cause. His conscience continued to haunt him, until shortly before the conquest of Mecca, when he went to Medina and accepted Islam.

Khalid was by nature exceptionally brave and courageous. He recognized this quality of his, and saw how to use it to full effect. By becoming fully aware of himself, he recognized the special part that had been delegated to him on the vast stage of the Islamic arena. He determined to use the courage God had given him to destroy polytheistic religion, and establish monotheism in its place.

Khalid, therefore, dedicated the rest of his life to active service in the cause of Islam. Continually he would ask God to make him strong and steadfast in this path, and he also used to ask God's Prophet to pray for him.

As for Abu Huraira, he did not have the same qualities as Khalid. What he did have, however, was a

prodigious memory. Recognizing where his talents lay, he resolved to use them in the service of Islam.

It is related in the Hadith that Abu Huraira once asked the Prophet to pray that God should give him knowledge, which he would not forget. The Prophet said “Amen” to that, and prayed as Abu Huraira had requested. Abu Huraira’s exceptional memory was both a result of the Prophet’s prayer for him, and also of his own eagerness to serve Islam in the way most suited to his talents and temperament.

Under the protective wing of such prayers, he devoted himself heart and soul to the area to which he was assigned. Spending as much time as he could in the company of the Prophet, he listened attentively to what was said, memorizing it and – when the need arose – writing it down. By recognizing where his own talents lay, and in doing all he could to develop them, he has taken his place in Islamic history as the greatest original narrator of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

Every person has a responsibility to first recognize himself – to see where his own talents lie and do all he can to channel them in a positive direction. By doing this one is benefiting, not only oneself, but also even more the cause to which one is committed.

Importance of Education

The Importance of education is quite clear. Education is the knowledge of putting one's potentials to maximum use. One can safely say that a human being is not in the proper sense till he is educated.

This importance of education is basically for two reasons. The first is that the training of a human mind is not complete without education. Education makes man a right thinker. It tells man how to think and how to make decision.

The second reason for the importance of education is that only through the attainment of education, man is enabled to receive information from the external world; to acquaint himself with past history and receive all necessary information regarding the present. Without education, man is as though in a closed room and with education he finds himself in a room with all its windows open towards outside world. This is why Islam attaches such great importance to knowledge and education. When the Qur'an began to be revealed, the first word of its first verse was 'Iqra,' that is, read. Education is thus the starting point of every human activity.

A scholar (*alim*) is accorded great respect in the hadith. According to a hadith the ink of the pen of a scholar is more precious than the blood of a martyr. The reason being that a martyr is engaged in defense work while scholar builds individuals and nations along positive lines. In this way he bestows a real life to the world.

The Qur'an repeatedly asks us to observe the earth and the heavens. This instills in man a desire to learn natural science. All the books of hadith have a chapter on learning (*ilm*). In Sahih Bukhari there is a chapter entitled "The virtue of one who acquires *ilm* and imparts that to others."

How great importance is attached to learning in Islam can be understood from an event in the life of the Prophet. At the battle of Badr in which the Prophet gained victory over his opponents, seventy people of the enemy rank were taken prisoner. These prisoners of war were literate people. In order to benefit from their education the Prophet declared that if one prisoner teaches ten Medinan children how to read and write, this will serve as his penalty and he will be set free. This was the first school in the history of Islam established by the Prophet himself with all its teachers being non-Muslims. Furthermore, they were all war prisoners. There was all the risk that after their release they will again create problems for Islam and Muslims. This Sunnah of the Prophet shows that education is to be received whatever the risk involved. On the one hand Islam places great emphasis on learning, on the other; all those factors which are necessary to make progress in learning have been provided by God.

One of these special factors is the freedom of research. One example of it is that in Makkah, the birthplace of the Prophet, dates were not grown. Afterwards the Prophet migrated to Medina, the city of

dates. One day the Prophet saw that some people were atop the date trees busy in doing something. On being asked what they were engaged in, they replied that they were pollinating. The Prophet suggested them not to do so. The following year date yield was considerably very low. The Prophet enquired them of the reason. They told him that the date crop depended on pollination. Since he suggested them to do otherwise, they had refrained from that. The Prophet then told them to go on doing as they used to, and that, "You know the worldly matters better than me."

In this way, the Prophet of Islam separated scientific research from religion. This meant that in the world of nature, man must enjoy full opportunity to conduct free research and adopt the conclusions arrived at after the research. Placing such great emphasis on knowledge. This process began in Makkah, then it reached to Medina and Damascus, afterwards it found its center in Baghdad. Ultimately it entered Spain. Spain flourished with extraordinary progress made in various academic and scientific disciplines. This flood of scientific progress entered Europe and ultimately resulted in producing the modern scientific age.

Nightly Preparation for a Mighty Task

The chapter of the Qur'an entitled "Al-Muzammil" (The Mantled One) commences with these verses:

"You who are wrapped up in your mantle, keep vigil all night, save for a few hours: half the night, or a little less or a little more: and with measured tone recite the Qur'an. We are about to address to you words of surpassing gravity. It is in the watches of the night that impressions are strongest and words most certain; in the day-time you are hard pressed with work. Remember the name of your Lord and dedicate yourself to Him utterly." (71:1-8)

From these verses it is clear that God requires His servants to be so devoted to divine service that they rise at night in order to perform their duties to the Lord. To forgo one's sleep and spend the night hours in pursuit of a cause indicates the highest level of dedication; it shows that one has associated oneself utterly with the object of one's dedication, and will soon be in a position to represent it in the world.

This applies to worldly pursuits also. Almost all the individuals who have reached great heights in any field have been those who were willing to stay awake at night in order to gain proficiency in it.

To become a true Muslim is to become a personification of Islam in the eyes of the world; it is to become so associated with Islam that one is fit to carry its message to far corners of the globe. This requires intense preparation, which must be conducted in a spirit keen enough to fuel one for work through the night hours. Success does not come in mundane fields without such dedication. How, then, can it come in the field of divine service, for there is no task more difficult, and more beset by obstacles – both within and without – than that of carrying the flame of true faith in God before the world.

Can circumcision curb Aids?

New evidence suggests that circumcision of all male babies could help to halt the global Aids epidemic. With 50m living cases and more than 16m deaths, the disease is now the worst human health disaster since the Black Death.

The thesis – laid out in a scientific paper to be published soon – seems likely to create huge controversy as it represents a complete change in accepted ideas about the transmission of Aids.

One of the paper's authors, Roger Short, professor of obstetrics at Melbourne University and a respected scientist with long experience of Aids-ravaged areas, has been told he cannot address the subject at a forthcoming international conference.

Short and his co-author, Dr. Robert Szabo, are convinced that a high level of receptors -sites to which invading organisms attach themselves-on the inside of the foreskin make it responsible for transmission.

Short and Szabo noted a sharp difference in the prevalence of HIV infection in the 'Aids belt' countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In some areas the infection rates are as high as 25 per cent, in others as low as 1 per cent. The lower infection rates were clearly associated with the practice of male circumcision. "The presence of an intact foreskin," says the Short-Szabo paper "has consistently been shown to be the single most significant factor associated with the much higher prevalence of HIV in countries of the Aids belt."

The link is stronger than with more familiar indicators such as promiscuity, other sexually transmitted diseases and multiple marriages.

Even more startling evidence came from a recent study in Uganda, reported in February. This showed that among a large group of "discordant couples" – where one is infected and one not – no circumcised males became infected over 30 months, even though their wives were HIV-positive. Short describes these results as "staggeringly significant".

Outside Africa there is the same pattern. Countries with low circumcision rates, such as Thailand, India and Cambodia, have between 10 and 50 times the rates of infection compared with countries with high circumcision rates, such as the Philippines, Bangladesh and Indonesia. Once they get ethical clearance in Australia, Short and Szabo intend to test their conclusions by applying live HIV virus to newly removed foreskins to check its rate of uptake. They could have definite results within weeks. If experimentally confirmed, the implications are radical. Short and Szabo believe that about 80 per cent of male HIV infections in the world happens through the foreskin. Future generations could be saved if mass circumcision began now. Short believes his findings should be spread globally, as rapidly as possible.

"There has been insufficient focus on prevention," he said, "and too much emphasis on the search for a vaccine." Despite the billions poured into research, there is still no sign of an Aids vaccine.

By Bryan Appleyard

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Working on the Individual

A man was riding his bicycle one day when suddenly his brake jammed. Luckily there was a bicycle repair-shop nearby, so he took his bike there to have it fixed. Thinking that the mechanic would fix the brake at the point where it was jammed, the cyclist was surprised to see him tap away with a small hammer at a completely different place. Before he was able to express his surprise, however, the mechanic handed the bike over. "That's fixed it. You can take it away now," he said. And off the cyclist rode, with his bike once again running smoothly.

What was true of this bicycle is true also of human society. When there is something wrong with society, people usually jump to the conclusion that where the malaise lies, there also lies the cure. But this is not the case. Usually the root of the malaise lies in a different place, far away from the symptoms. Until the cause is removed, the malaise itself will not go away.

For instance, there might be a lack of solidarity in society, or one's people may be the victims of oppression. A society may be beset with an atmosphere of intrigue, with the result that its voice carries no weight in the world. Detecting these symptoms, one who determines to right the ills of society might think that the cure lies in calling meetings and conventions in order to bring people together, feeding them emotional speeches and passing high-sounding resolutions and so on.

But this is not the way to cure the actual ills of society. To do so, one has to work on the cause, not the symptoms, for usually one will find that while a problem seems to be afflicting one part of society, the cure lies elsewhere. If there is a lack of solidarity, for instance, the reason for this is the failure of individuals to stand together. It is the individual, then, who has to be worked on. Solidarity has to be achieved at an individual level before it can come about in society for it is a law of nature, and human society is no exception, that for a tree to bear good fruit, it is the seed, not the fruit itself, that has to be improved.

Signs of the Universe

Do you not see how God has subdued for you all that is on the earth? He has also given you ships which sail the sea at His bidding. He holds the sky from falling down: (This it shall not do) except by His own will. Compassionate is Allah, and Merciful to men.

It is He who has given you life, and He who will cause you to die and make you live again. Surely man is ungrateful (22:65-66).

All the objects of the universe continuously maintain a special equilibrium. If this were disrupted, things would become harmful instead of beneficial. If we put a piece of metal into water it will sink instantly. But water has been bound by a special law laid down by God, which makes it possible for wood or iron which has been given the shape of a boat not to sink. Similarly, there are innumerable bodies in space, which should apparently fall down, but are bound by a special law which keeps them suspended in their orbits with great precision.

Man has not been created by man. He has been created by God. Then he has been placed in a world which is full of blessings. However, on discovering his freedom, man becomes so vain and insolent that he shows no gratitude to his greatest Benefactor. The entire universe is a proof in itself. It is a practical demonstration of all those realities. Man is required to believe theoretically in the same realities of which the universe is a practical demonstration. If man were to study the system of the universe, giving ear to its silent language, he would receive inspiration and enlightenment from it, and he would be able to read all the divine realities in it as if it were an open book. In it he would see the Creator fully mirrored.

Finding God is entirely possible. The only condition is that man should seriously pursue His discovery as the greatest goal in his life.

Unlocking the Gates to Success

The guest struggled desperately to open the lock, and as he went on and on twisting and twisting and turning the key, and trying to jerk the lock open, his vexation finally turned to fury. "This lock is defective!" he shouted to anyone who cared to listen. Then he muttered under his breath that his host had been a fool to buy such a lock. The next to have his wrath vented on it was the lock-making industry, which produced worthless goods, not caring whether they worked or not and not caring whether people were put to trouble or not. Their business was only to make money out of unsuspecting consumers! By this time he was at the end of his tether and had decided he was going to break it open with a hammer. Just then, his host arrived and tried the key in the lock himself. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" he exclaimed. "I quite forgot I had changed this lock, but I just momentarily forgot, and gave you the wrong key." He then produced the right key and the lock opened instantly. So the guest's ire had been quite misdirected and he had ultimately achieved nothing by it except reduce himself to a state of utter exhaustion.

How many latter-day Muslims find themselves in this sorry predicament, faced as they are with one impasse after another, finding areas which they urgently need to enter, difficult of access, nay, impenetrable, because the way is barred by locks to which they have the wrong keys. This modern age has changed the locks to life's doors, but we still carry the same old keys around with us, hopefully fitting them here and there, staring in incomprehension when locks do not snap open for us, and then frittering away our energies in senseless rage. We curse first of all the lock-makers, then the environment. But it is all to no avail, because you just cannot unlock new locks with old keys.

Our leaders, in their frustration, have thought fit to identify certain "enemies of Islam" and to trace all their woes to them – as if they were the sole purveyors of these impregnable locks. But in this world of God, there is no attitude more insensate than this. Here, if we feel deprived and thwarted, it is because we are already suffering the punishments for our own negligence and shortcomings. In this world, most of our afflictions are due to our failure to live up to the standard of the times. The day we realize how much we are out of step with modernity, we shall be in a position to remove all obstacles from our path. We must fit the right keys to the locks on life's gates, and all avenues will open before us.

In the Nick of Time

A medical college professor, putting a student through an oral examination, asked him, "How many of these pills would you give to a man who had suffered a heart attack?" "Four," replied the student. A minute later, he piped up, "Professor, can I change my answer?" "You can, by all means," said the professor, looking at his watch. "But, regrettably, your patient has already been dead for 40 seconds."

Certain matters in life are so critical that they require the appropriate step to be taken without a moment's hesitation. But an instant decision must also be a correct one, otherwise the consequences could be drastic, and could mean a lifetime of repentance.

Our moments of decision-making are often very similar to our attempts to board a train. Catching a train requires preparation. We have to pack up our luggage, making sure we take the right things with us, buy a ticket, arrange transport to take us to the station and we must, of course already be on the platform at the appointed time, otherwise we are surely going to be left behind. For the train is no respecter of persons. It arrives on time and departs on time, and pays no heed whatsoever to tardy passengers. If we are like the medical student who was caught on the wrong foot because of lack of preparation and who was much too late with the correct answer, the train of life will go on its scheduled course and we shall be left standing, wondering what to do next and how to avert the disastrous consequences of our failure to get on board. It is, therefore, necessary to be prepared for all eventualities in life. That means assiduously acquiring a good education and losing no time in gaining useful experience relevant to our chosen occupations. It, above all, requires a mental and physical readiness to seize opportunities when they come our way, and to be firm of purpose, never permitting one's energy to be frittered away in pointless vacillation. (116:2)

Working Together

In the days of the steam engine, the engine drivers had no option but to stand at close quarters to a blazing fire. It was all part of being an engine driver, and without that no train could have run. Much the same thing happens to the individuals who make things go in civic life. They are confronted by the blazing fire of their own anger at other members of society.

They rage at wrongdoers, cheats and shirkers, both real and imagined. But just as the engine driver controls both the fire which drives the engine and his own desire to escape from it, so must be the individual in society tame both his own fury and a desire simply to run away from adverse situations. If a society is to hold together and function in harmony, individuals must learn to bear with those who oppose and hurt them. There is no group of people in which differences of opinion do not arise; no group in which there are never feelings of grievance and resentment. It would, indeed, be unrealistic to expect that everything should be plain sailing.

How then can people live and work together? How, with seemingly irreconcilable differences between individuals, can society be welded into a cohesive whole? There is only one way: people must bury their differences and agree to disagree. But this can happen only if people react coolly and rationally in difficult situations where relations are strained and there seems no way out of the dilemma. It can happen only if people are fully aware of their responsibilities towards others, as individuals, and towards their community as a whole.

This may seem to be asking the impossible. But this is not so. Every individual does these things in the most natural way within his own domestic circle. In quite normal families, differences of opinion occur almost every day, but the bonds of love and kinship prevail and grievances are all finally buried. It is in this way that a family holds together. Every home is a practical example of people agreeing to disagree.

This spirit of give and take which is a matter of instinct in a family is something which can emerge in a community only through conscious effort on the part of its members. While it is an emotional bond that keeps families from disintegrating, it is a rational effort which cements society, constraining its members to hold together despite all differences.

The Next World

The present world may seem to lack nothing; but the order of this world has been established with the trial of man in mind. According to God's scheme, only a world which leads up to reward and punishment can be considered ideal and permanent. This is not the case in the present world. So, when the period of trial is over, God will destroy this world and create another more complete one. There the evil will be separated from the righteous, and all will be confronted with the just consequences of their deeds.

The present world is full of strange paradoxes. Here, birds chant hymns of divine praise, while man recites eulogies to himself. Stars and planets continue their voyages without clashing with one another, while man willfully sets himself on a collision course with others. In this world there is no tree which undermines another, but men spend their lives plotting one another's destruction. Lofty, upright trees show their meekness by casting their shadows on the ground, but if man ascends to any heights he immediately becomes arrogant. This attitude of man's is totally contrary to God's will for His entire creation. Doomsday shall erase these paradoxes, the might of all save God shall be eradicated, and every will save His shall be negated.

When this period of trial has run its course, God will destroy the present world and create another one. There, the righteous and wicked will be separated from one another. The former will reside in paradise and the latter in hell-fire.

As You Sow, So Shall You Reap

Only those who have sown crops can expect a harvest, and what is harvested will be whatever has been sown. The same is true of the next life: there, all men will reap as they have sown. Those who are always jealous, inimical, cruel, and conceited are like those who plant thorn trees. Those who plant thorns will eat thorns in the hereafter. On the other hand, whoever chooses the path of justice, benevolence and acknowledgment of the truth is like the planter of fruit trees. In the next life he will enjoy the sumptuous fruits of his own planting.

People adopt a rebellious stance in this world; yet continue to imagine that they will be raised up amongst God's obedient servants. They are willfully destructive, but still think that, in eternity, they will have a share in the fruits of constructiveness. Their lives are based on mere words and they believe that these words will take the form of reality in the hereafter. They hear the message of God and refuse to accept it; even so, they have the presumption to think that God will be pleased with them.

God beckons man towards paradise, the abode of eternal comfort and bliss, but man is lost in transitory and illusory pleasures. He does not heed the call of God. He thinks he is gaining while, in fact, he is losing. He believes that the worldly constructions which he is busy erecting will serve him well in the future, but he is only building walls of sand, which will fall never to rise again.

The Inhabitants of Paradise

Paradise is for those, and those alone, who reject all material forms of greatness in order to assert the majesty of Almighty God; who empty their hearts of every other affection and enshrine God therein.

Paradise is for the just, not the cruel, the humble, not the haughty. He who mistreats and degrades others, even when he has grounds for complaint against them forfeits the right to enter Paradise. Plotting to destroy others with whom one is on bad terms and taking delight only in one's own honour and esteem can close the gates of Paradise to one forever. Neither is one fit for Paradise if one's feelings of love and attachment are wounded by criticism of anyone other than God; for Paradise is the domain of those chaste souls who reserve their adoration for God alone, who delight in hearing God's praise and find solace in the sight of God's majesty.

No one who is blind to the truth can enter Paradise, for Paradise is for those alone who associate themselves so closely with the truth that they never fail to see falsehood and reality for what they truly are.

The Straight Path

A train which runs on its tracks will have no trouble in reaching its destination. But should its wheels slip off the rails – no matter to what side – its journey will come to a sudden and disastrous end. Man's journey through life is in some ways on a parallel. If he goes off the rails, it will spell catastrophe. But if he continues to travel along the straight and narrow path which leads directly to God, he will safely reach his destination.

Many examples of human aberration – a 'going-off-the-rails' – can be cited: the satisfying of one's own selfish desires to the exclusion of all else; total absorption in the greatness of some human individual, living or dead; aiming, by preference, at unworthy objectives; obeying impulses of jealousy, hate and vindictiveness, dedicating oneself to any nation or party on the assumption that it is supreme. All of these paths are crooked and diverge from the true way. No one who chooses such a path can ever hope to reach his true goal in life.

It is a sad fact that one tends to stray from the straight path whenever one is obsessed with some thing, person or idea other than God. Whenever one's efforts are directed elsewhere, one is embarking on a detour which can never bring one back to God. Such deviation from the true path can cause man to go totally astray.

The only sure way to spiritual success is to focus one's attentions and efforts on God alone. This is the straight path and involves total attachment to God and a life lived out in complete accordance with His will.

Any path which is not directed towards God is a wrong turning, and will never lead Man to his true destination.

Weighty Actions

The Disaster! What is the Disaster?

Would that you knew what the Disaster is!

On that day men shall become like scattered moths and the mountains like tufts of carded wool.

Then he whose scales are heavy shall dwell in bliss; but he whose scales are light, the Abyss shall be his home.

If only you knew what this is like!

It is a scorching fire (101:1-11).

The Doomsday earthquake will rend everything asunder. All the footholds which human beings clung to will be demolished. Nothing will escape its impact. Afterwards a new world will be brought into existence where the truth will be given its full weight. Everything else will pale in comparison. In this world people's likes and dislikes prevail. Things are valued according to people's preferences. But the world of the Hereafter is God's world. There those things will be given importance which are important in the eyes of God alone; all else will become valueless.

Actions in this world derive their value from appearances. In the Hereafter the value of all actions will be determined in respect of their reality. The more sincere people's actions are, the more these will be judged important. Actions devoid of sincerity will lose all importance in the world of the Hereafter, however much these may have appeared important to the people in this world, who judge values by appearances.

In the present world such actions are adjudged important as make concessions to worldly considerations, remain in conformity with current trends and assume importance in the context of the social tradition of the time. Those who can bow to all these considerations acquire great position and honour in this world.

The state of affairs in the Hereafter will be totally different. There, it is the principled life which will be given weightage. There, those actions which have been in accordance with the highest of standards will have value set upon them. There, all importance will be given to those actions which have lasting merit, and not to those actions which were performed keeping temporary considerations in view.

In this world falsehood too may appear to carry weight, but in the Hereafter nothing will carry weight except the Truth.

PRIDE PRECEDES A FALL

The Prophet had a she-camel named Adhba. No one would let their camel walk ahead of it. One day a desert-dweller, riding on a small she-camel, came along and rode in front of the Prophet. When the Prophet realized that this was not to the liking of his companions, he said: "God has taken upon Himself to bring low anything which raises itself up in the world." (Bukhari)

Another Day! How Wonderful

“When you wake up in the morning, jump out of bed and shout, ‘Great! Another Day!’ you are a success.”

This was a view expressed by a prominent businessman, but it could very well be the scholar, the sage, the ascetic, depending upon how you interpret success.

Anyone, in fact, who regards the new day with such optimism is surely well-equipped, mentally and emotionally, to tackle whatever life has in store for him. But, whether we regard the appearance of the new day as one more joyful occasion for work or not, can we honestly say that we have ever stopped to ponder over the miraculous aspect of day following night, for all eternity, as a result of the earth rotating on its axis and of the sun’s never ceasing to flood with life-giving light our ever-changing hemisphere? Have we ever thought of this alternation of day and night as a totally unique occurrence and of this all being part of the divine pattern which produces such advantageous conditions for human existence? Nowhere in the universe, in fact, are there prime conditions such as we have on earth for the emergence and development of life as we know it.

Other heavenly bodies are either too hot, too cold, too gaseous, too windswept or too fiery, or can be like Jupiter and the moon, proceeding in their respective orbits without rotating on their axes, so that one half of the globe is permanently illuminated while the other is for ever plunged in darkness.

The denizen of such a sphere would have no rising sun to stir his enthusiasm and no peaceful sunset to signal the moment for rest. He would have no periods of vigour and achievement alternating with soothing periods of repose. For the human being, accustomed to his diurnal-nocturnal alternation, such an existence would be one of utter staleness and weariness, with no refreshment ever in sight. Yet this pattern, to which all living things on earth have been attuned from time immemorial, is something which we take for granted, and for which we do not consider it necessary to offer up our thanks.

But this unique ordering of day and night is God’s own doing, for the special benefit of man, and we would do well never to lose sight of what an extraordinary blessing it is. (116:15).

When One is Broken in Two

When an inanimate object, such as a piece of wood, is broken in two, it remains broken. Never again can it remold itself into one piece. Animate objects, however, live on even after breakages. When one live amoeba is cut in two, it turns into two live amoebae.

This is surely a sign from God, showing us the wealth of opportunity that God has kept in store for us live human beings in this world. For a human being, no defeat is final, no disaster permanently crippling. As an animate being, no human can be finally shattered for, when broken, its every piece is welded again into a new, live being, if anything, more formidable than before.

For a human being, failure is not failure at all, for it only serves to make one into a more profound, thoughtful person. Obstacles present no hindrance, for they open up new avenues of intellectual advance. Setbacks do not stunt one's growth, for even if one is crushed into many small pieces, each piece in its own right has the capacity to form the building blocks of an entirely new being.

Such are the never-ending possibilities which God has created for man in this world, but it is only one who is alive to these possibilities who can benefit from them, gathering and marshalling his resources after some shattering setback. When he tastes defeat, he does not lose heart, but prepares himself to issue a new challenge. He builds anew his shipwrecked boat, and, aboard it sets out once again on his voyage through life (118:9).

The Goal of Virtue

Zayd Ibn Muhalhil, famed for his poetry, his horse racing and his swordsmanship, was born in Najd, some time before the birth of the Prophet. He came to be known as Zayd al Khayl, the word Khayl, in Arabic being used to signify both 'horse' and 'horseman'. A fiery poem composed by him lavished praise on the horseman and the wielder of the sword, and cited his tribe as leader of the people and the chief of his tribe as the leader in any war waged by expert swordsmen. But all this was before his conversion to Islam. Zayed al Khayl came to Medina after the Prophet had emigrated to that city. While there he visited the Prophet and embraced the faith. The Prophet disapproving of his name changed it from Zayd al Khayl to Zayd al Khayr, meaning Zayd the Good. He died in 9 A.H. in Medina.

This incident demonstrates the true spirit of Islam. The goal of Islam is not to turn a man into Zayd the horse racer, but Zayd the Good. In ancient Arabia, horse racing and the wielding of the sword were considered feats of heroism. But the Prophet of Islam corrected this way of thinking by instilling in people the idea that our true goal should be to become the bearers of Good. Rather than try to kill people, we should bring them the gift of life, for the feats really worthy of our esteem are performed in the field of virtue.

In today's jargon the main goal of Islam is to "produce creative human beings." For belief in God does awaken creativity within the individual. In all respects, he becomes a new man – his thinking rising above the mundane and his moral fibre far surpassing the commonplace. While as yet living in this world, he becomes a heavenly soul. In short, a believer's goal should not be to emulate Zayd al Khayl but Zayd al Khayr. Virtue should be the essence of the believer's personality.

The Oneness of Humanity

On April 5, I took part in a Seminar at Rishikesh attended by a number of highly educated Hindus. At one session on this occasion there was a good group discussion which is stated here in brief.

The subject of the discussion was how to produce an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and respect in human society. The Hindus suggested that the concept of the oneness of reality should be inculcated in people's minds. They held that the truth was one but the paths to reach the truth were many. Any path one followed would finally lead one to God.

This is an age-old concept, in support of which the arguments are all based on analogies. For instance one Hindu scholar had this to say: If you are standing at the foot of a hillock, you will find only one way going to the top of the hill. But if you climb up the hill, and look around, you will find that there are paths all around the hillock, and that all these paths, albeit separate from each other, reach the same destination, that is, the top of the hillock.

Such analogies carry no weight in academic terms. Arguments based on such parallel cases can easily be refuted by citing other parallel cases. For instance, if someone is standing at a railway station like Bombay or Delhi, he will see dozens of trains in motion, but that would not imply that all the trains were going to the same railway station. In one analogy all the paths are converging on the one destination, while in the other all paths are diverging to a separate destination.

This concept, in essence, has nothing to do with creating tolerance and respect in human society. Even if everyone accepted this theory, it could not serve any purpose so far as the desired social goal is concerned. The practical proof of this is that infighting among the adherents of the same religion has continued since ancient times till today. Then how can the concept of unity which has failed to unite the adherents of the same religion, succeed in uniting the followers of different religions?

"The unity of religion produces social unity." This statement implies that the concept of the unity of religion has yet to be put into practice. This is at variance with the facts. It is a matter of history that this concept has been experimented with on a very high plane, yet it has been an utter failure. The emperor Akbar, with all the power of the state, Dr. Bhagwan Das with all his encyclopedic knowledge, Mahatma Gandhi with all his massive following are some of the prominent names which appear on the list of unsuccessful experimenters.

This shows that the real problem facing us today is not the difficulties of experimenting with the concept of the unity of religion, but rather the lack of the desired result after prolonged experiment. In other words, what is lacking is not a valid theory, but a positive outcome. What is needed in this case is to find another solution rather than repeat an experiment that has failed again and again.

The more proper and practicable viewpoint in this matter is one which is explained in the Qur'an. According to the Qur'anic concept, all human beings have been created from one single soul (4:1). That is, all human beings have a common source. They are the descendants of a common ancestor. This means that all human beings are each other's brothers and sisters. The general acceptance that all are blood sisters and blood brothers will on its own produce unity.

According to this concept, the basis for creating unity and mutual respect in society is the firm belief that, despite apparent differences, all belong to the same human brotherhood.

This is the only formula for creating an atmosphere of respect and unity in society which is both practicable and also in accordance with nature.

The Time is a Witness

I swear by the declining day that perdition shall be the lot of man, except for those who have faith and do good works; who exhort each other to justice and fortitude (103:1-3).

Man, born to live a specific number of years, increases in age until he reaches the final stage of his life, the final limit. Then he dies. The inevitability of this event tells us that only that person is successful who is able in a proper manner to avail of the limited period allotted to him in this world; for one who does not, the time will irrevocably pass, and nothing will fall to his lot but frustration and repentance.

Every moment man is heading towards his death. What does this mean? It means that if he fails to avail of the time allotted to him, his ultimate fate will be a state of deprivation. To turn life into a success story, man has to act himself, while for failure no action is required. Failure is heading towards him on its own.

A saintly person once observed that he had learnt the meaning of this chapter from an ice vendor, who was calling out aloud in the market: 'O people, have mercy on one whose goods are melting continuously! O people, have mercy on one whose goods are melting continuously!' On hearing this call, it came to his mind that the way the ice was reducing in size at every moment, the lifespan given to man was similarly reducing in length. Thus, if the opportunity to act is not availed of properly by engaging oneself in good actions, this is man's real loss. (*Tafsir Kabir*, Imam Razi)

Time is put to the proper use by one who gives proof of three things in the present world. One is Faith, that is, consciousness of reality and its recognition; the second is just actions, that is, doing what should be done and refraining from what should not be done; the third is enjoining upon others truth, justice and patience.

It is only the deep perception of reality which will turn a man into a missionary and a preacher of truth. Patience is a necessity to succeed in this world. Only when a man has the will to renounce all those things which go against faith, does he receive the blessings of faith. Only when he applies a break to his desires, is it possible for him to adopt the path of virtue. Only when a man himself remains patient in unpleasant situations, is he able to exhort others to Truth and Justice.

Knowledge and Ignorance

When harm is done to man, he prays to his Lord and turns to Him in repentance; yet no sooner does He bestow on him His favour than he forgets what he had prayed and sets up equals to Him, in order to lead men away from His path.

Say: 'Enjoy your unbelief awhile; but you shall surely be consigned to Hell. Can he who passes his night in adoration, standing up or on his knees, who dreads the terrors of the life to come and hopes to earn the mercy of his Lord, (be compared to the unbeliever)? Are the wise and ignorant equal?' Truly, none will take heed but men of understanding (39:8-9).

Everyone experiences moments of helplessness, when the things treated by him as props fail to help him. In moments of adversity, man then turns away from all material support and begins to invoke the Almighty. It is as if he has come to realise that there is no god but the one God. But no sooner he is clear of adversity than he reverts to his previous state. Worse still, he attributes his salvation to something other than God. Sometimes he attributes it to a miracle wrought by false gods, at other times to the 'miracle' of cause and effect.

Some people are distressed only by material loss. Others become restless at the remembrance of God. It is people such as the latter who are God fearing. Their belief in God is not the product of circumstances (that is, inherited by birth in a certain family) but is a conscious discovery on their part. They have found God as a Superior Being and all their hopes and fears are associated with that same Being. Their restlessness does not allow them to pass the night sleeping comfortably. Their solicitude is not that of ignorance but results from the remembrance of God.

The one who experiences great emotional stirring in remembering God is the truly knowledgeable person, while the one who is affected in this way only by material matters, who is aroused only by material shocks from his comfortable sleep, is the really ignorant person.

Sincerity and piety the essence of Islam

Uthman ibn Affan tells of how the Prophet said that he knew which testimony would save one from the Fire, provided it was uttered from the depth of one's heart. Umar offered to explain the nature of such an affirmation to the Companions. He said that it was the testimony of sincerity, which God had prescribed for the Prophet and his companions, and the testimony of piety, which the Prophet had pressed upon his uncle, Abu Talib, as the latter lay dying: it was, ultimately, the testimony that there is none worthy of being worshipped save God.